

50 At 50

The marquee on the Boonsboro, Maryland bank read 22 °F as I shivered my way to the starting line of the JFK 50 Mile Ultra Marathon. This is crazy – I'm going to run 50 miles, over a mountain on the Appalachian Trail, on a course I've never seen, and I'm already going into hypothermia!

I flashed back to earlier this year when I was contemplating my impending 50th birthday. It seemed like the perfect gesture; to run 50 miles on my 50th birthday. It was just the kind of challenge I liked – no great ability required, just tenacity. That's when I decided to run a 50-mile ultra marathon. In looking for the right race in which to lose my ultra-virginity, I checked race schedules against my training schedule – which was going to take some time – and found only two races that would work. The Le Grizz ultra in Montana I quickly scratched off the list when it said runners should “watch for bears on the course”! That left the JFK 50, on November 19th, in rural Maryland - and so the odyssey began.

Using an ultra training regime recommended in a running magazine, I started serious training in July. For the first time in over 30 years of running, I actually put the training program on the calendar and vowed to follow it – which, excepting time off for a few injuries – I did. The key was back-to-back long runs on Saturday and Sunday. Thanks to the sadistic tendencies of my training partner, Bill, there was no respite from this grind. At first it wasn't so bad; the runs were 2 and 3 hours; but at the peak, they were 4 and 5 hours. Running 18 - 20 miles on Saturday and then going out and doing 28 – 30 on Sunday is possibly for the weak-minded, but definitely not for the weak-willed. A sprained ankle about 2 weeks before the race turned out to be a blessing in disguise - figuring that more runs would only aggravate the ankle, I decided to stop all training and simply rested. I believe that extra rest enabled me to “power-through” the last 25 miles of the race.

Now, here I stood, shivering, waiting for the 7AM start. Go! Surprise – unlike the stampede that typifies most race starts, I learned that an ultra moves in relatively slow motion. Except for a few elites, the nearly 1000 runners started off like this was a social jog. There was lots of chatter and, a mile into the race when we hit the first big hill, I was surprised to see nearly everyone walking. “Save your energy” they said, “ we've got a long way to go”. This conservative wisdom made a lot of sense as we hit the Appalachian Trail and spent the next 13 or so miles going up steep mountain trails, switch-backing down ravines, and generally trying to avoid twisting an ankle on the innumerable leaf-shrouded rocks.

Though torturous for the feet, this part of the course was a delight for the senses. Forest, leafless now except for a few hardy, brilliantly golden exceptions, opened to fields sparkling with the morning frost, and a panorama of mountains. Crisp air, the smell of wood-burning fireplaces drifting up from the valleys - it was magnificent. This was life at its fullest.

At Weaverton Ledges, the 15-mile mark, we descended the Appalachian Trail to the historic Chesapeake & Ohio barge canal National Park. The canal towpath, open only to pedestrian and bicycles, would be our course for the next 26.3 miles – a marathon by itself. Meandering alongside the Potomac River, past Harpers Ferry and other historic sites, it was easy to lose track of time on this flat, and wonderfully scenic course. It is a runner's dream-course, with its smooth dirt surface cushioned by a thick carpet of leaves, and - perfectly flat. The sky was a beautiful, crystal clear blue, there was no wind, and the sun had warmed things up to a near-ideal 40 degrees or so.

For the first 10 miles on the tow-path I hooked up with a veteran, John, from Manassas, Virginia, who had run the race several times, and we settled into a very conservative pace – run 20 minutes, walk 5. When we hit the aid station at mile 25, I realized two things: I wouldn't make my goal of a 10 hour finish if I stayed on this pace, and I felt good, surprisingly good! I decided that I could pick up the pace and adopted the strategy recommended by the Race Director – don't think about how many miles to the finish, just think about getting to the next aid station(s), which, by the way, were extremely well stocked. Hot soup, cookies, candy, power bars, sandwiches, sports drinks – these aid stations had it all. If you bonked, it would be no-one's fault but your own.

At the 29-mile aid station I had 3 or 4 sugary cookies washed down by a cup of chicken noodle soup. As I resumed the run, the cookie/soup fuel kicked in and I definitely hit the runner's high. I was feeling positively GOOD... and picked up the pace even more. I started passing runners... in the ultra-marathon, slow motion way. I was in the groove and I had to check myself from running all-out. Even though I felt great, I knew there was a long way to go and a few minutes of exuberance could blow it for me at the end; so I kept the pace brisk, but very steady. I think this was my best leg of the entire race.

The 35-mile aid station was more soup & cookies, but this time the magic wasn't quite as good. I could feel myself flagging; I had to work harder to hold the pace. I worried about "hitting the wall". At mile 42, the course leaves the towpath and immediately climbs a short but steep hill. As I crested the hill, the late afternoon sun showered down across a bucolic countryside. The narrow, smoothly paved road meandered through the rich farmland, complete with cattle. The early-start runners, who had begun the race at 5 AM, were now strung out in front of me as far as I could see. It was cooling off now and I was feeling really good again, and so pushed the pace. I had made up a lot of time and, although I knew I couldn't make my 10-hour goal, I could come close. I started passing clusters of 5 AM runners.

Now the roadside markers were counting down the miles to the finish. 7...6...5. At 5 miles out I could feel my legs starting to tire and so used my last bit of magic – a double caffeine gel. It kicked in almost immediately and now the adrenaline started flowing. At mile 4 another 7 AM starter pulled up alongside me and said, "let's take it in". I later found out that his name was Greg and, at 30 years old, he was 20 years my junior. We picked it up a bit more and Greg dropped in behind me. We didn't speak again until just before the finish, but I could hear his footsteps drumming steadily behind me. At two miles out, the last aid station beckoned ahead of us...forget it, lets go for it! We blew by without stopping.

It was nearly dark now as the course turned to a long downhill entering the town of Williamsport. I passed the one-mile mark and my watch showed 9 hours 57 minutes. I cut loose and cruised the downhill with all that I had left - Greg followed. We pounded through town and then the course flattened out and, treacherously, started a slight incline for the last quarter mile of the course. Greg pulled up beside me – "lets push it," he said. "You go ahead, this is all I've got" I replied. We crossed the finish line 3 seconds apart. Who cares! It was a fantastic run, I was feeling better than I had ever felt at the finish of a marathon, and had fared much better than I expected for my first 50 miler; 10:05:43.

The post-race support is one of the truly great attributes of this race. The finish line was at the Williamsport Intermediate School, and the town had graciously made the facility available to finishers. Outside was now completely dark and cold, but inside, the school's gym was heavenly. Hot showers, real food –fried chicken and pizza – and plenty of post-race conversations with the 950 other runners you had shared the course with during the past 50 miles. After about 45 minutes of basking in this extraordinary atmosphere of camaraderie and achievement, I boarded the shuttle bus back to where I had left my car more than 12 hours earlier. As the windows on the car defrosted, I checked my cell phone and saw a message from my sadistic training partner, Bill, asking how it went. I called him and, still pumped with adrenaline, exclaimed " It was the best run of my life, what a fantastic experience for my first ultra". He queried "Your FIRST ultra ...?"

By Bob Dewitz